

Resilience, Dedication Demonstrated During Disasters

By Thom Robinson, public affairs specialist

When two devastating hurricanes slammed into the Gulf Coast in 2005, the lives of those who lived or worked in the region were turned upside down.

But within days after the storms passed, dedicated MARAD employees from Central Region in New Orleans and Beaumont were coming together to get the Port of New Orleans back online.

MARAD leadership asked then-Acting Central Region Director Deepak Varshney to put together a team to help the Port of New Orleans get back into operation. Robert Babin, supervisory marine surveyor, was selected as team leader to do so.

At MARAD Headquarters, a decision was made to temporarily relocate its New Orleans office and personnel to office space in Port Arthur, Texas.

To get the huge task in New Orleans started, the team smartly decided to utilize the resources of its ships, such as the MV *Cape Kennedy*. The ships' onboard sleeping berths and cabins were used as temporary lodging facilities for relief workers and first responders. And, just as importantly, MARAD ships were utilized to generate electricity and deliver clean, safe water. The ships served as floating dining facilities where galley cooks worked around-the-clock to feed thousands of meals to hungry relief workers. These initial actions by the MARAD team undoubtedly saved thousands of hours of travel time to and from the recovery work sites by providing meals, bunks and baths right where they were needed.

Carla Brown, the ship operations assistant at the Beaumont field office, coordinated the influx of MARAD personnel who were temporarily relocating to Port Arthur from storm-damaged New Orleans. She not only helped find "lost" MARAD employees from the New Orleans office, she also arranged lodging and office space for them at Port Arthur. Within a short period of time, she along with help of other employees had secured desks, computers, telephone facilities and office space for most of the inbound MARAD employees.

Sometimes in the storm's aftermath, contacting employees from MARAD's New Orleans office was difficult, but MARAD leaders and administrative personnel continued trying until they had a complete headcount and the whereabouts of all employees were known. Central Region's Mary Sandolph, a ship-operations administrative-support clerk in New Orleans, had some initial trouble with missed communications from the office. At the time, the telephones in her home didn't work and her cell phone battery had died. It wasn't until she plugged her cell phone into a car's lighter plug that a text message from MARAD flashed on her phone and

she reconnected with her coworkers. She then got quickly back to work. In fact, after the storm while working on Port of New Orleans recovery, she was assigned bunk space and lived at the docks onboard the moored MV *Cape Kennedy* for several weeks.

After Hurricane Katrina, Barbara Dupree, a MARAD ship-operations secretary in New Orleans and a Baton Rouge resident, temporarily relocated her office to Port Arthur. It was a short-lived plan, though, because just about the time she had things set up and running properly, Hurricane Rita came barreling in and she had to pack up the office and move again. This time, however, she went home to Baton Rouge and set up a functional communications office inside her own residence. From there, using her laptop computer and cell phone, she was able to arrange online-Internet meetings and coordinate conference calls. She also accomplished timecard, payroll and other necessary administrative duties for the government and for coworkers while telecommuting from her home.

"The good thing was all these people knew how to use laptops and the tools at their disposal," said Varshney, who is now Central Region's director. "They are all extremely dedicated and they knew what had to be done. Their ability to adapt was truly amazing. All of these people wanted to do something to help the people of New Orleans, Texas, the entire Gulf Coast Region and MARAD. And when you have that kind of commitment from the people who work for you, my job becomes easier."



Photo by Don Young

A few weeks after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, MARAD's Central Region advance team employees are on the job at the Port of New Orleans. Team members, along with visitors from MARAD Headquarters and South Atlantic Region, commemorate the advance team's efforts and success with a casual group portrait. Clockwise from left are Chico Morales, Deepak Varshney, HQ's William Cahill, Matthew McNally, SAR's Steve Jackson, Robert Babin, Mary Sandolph and Fernando Salvador.